



OUR SHORT STORY PAGE



EXCOMMUNICATED

By C. W. DAWSON

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THE scowling gates of the jail swung wide and two men emerged into the sunlight. They jostled each other in their eagerness to reach the street, as if they feared that some excuse might yet be found to detain them.

Now that they had gained the open and knew they were free, they paused irresolute, glanced back toward the prison, and stood still, gaping; it seemed almost as though they had already tired of being masterless and were coveting captivity.

The warden, who had unlocked the gates, leaned against the stonework, jangling his keys, watching them with quiet cynicism. He had seen it all before, how the routine and the iron discipline made weaklings out of men, robbing even the most daring of their initiative. He knew that the cruelest punishment of most prisoners is not endured in the cells, but in the first hours of release.

"Cheer up, boys," he said, kindly; "you'll get used to it. Seems kind of strange at first, don't it, after all these years?"

One of the men nodded. He was an old-timer, white-haired and broken; he had been a sneak thief for upward of half a century and had spent two-thirds of his manhood peering out from prison gratings. He was accustomed to be subservient; so he gave a watery smile and whispered hoarsely, "I guess we'll pull through all right, mister; and if they don't use us right over there," waving his hand vaguely to indicate everything that was not captive, "we can always do something and get brought back here."

The second man frowned angrily at hearing himself included in the last part of this sentence. He was much younger than his companion, and did not look over thirty. Tall and athletic in build, he carried himself with an erectness which was almost military. His forehead was broad, his features clean-cut and scholarly, his eyes gray and naturally honest. Despite his close-cropped hair and unfashionable attire, he had the indefinable distinction and courtesy of a gentleman born and bred.

Turning to the warden impatiently, he asked, "Can you tell me the way to the nearest station? I want to board a train going eastward."

The warden laughed good-naturedly; he was amused at this sudden resurrection of caste-spirit in a man whom it might have been his duty to have flogged yesterday. "Well, well!" he exclaimed. "So you've got important business already! We didn't give you much of a chance to get up the geography of this old town when first you came here, did we?"

Then he gave the desired information. As he stepped back into the jail and the two men moved away, he called out after them: "Say, boys, if you're ever hard-up and want a bed and breakfast, you know where to come. It costs you nothin' at our hotel; me and the government is always happy to entertain old friends."

A group of people who had collected outside the gates to watch for the discharge of prisoners, hearing the warden's parting shot, set up a titter. The younger of the two ex-convicts flushed. Squaring his shoulders and holding up his head, he made toward the crowd with a gesture that was threatening. As though he had been stricken with smallpox, room was made for him to pass, the men falling back hurriedly and grinning up at him in ill-disguised terror, the women uttering little shrieks and gathering in their skirts to avoid contamination.

He walked swiftly, anxious to get away from these witnesses of his degradation and to reach some spot where his record was not known and he might be unshamed. His white-haired companion tottered along behind, half running in his feeble efforts to keep up; at last, spent with the exertion, he cried, "Say, Knightly, you ain't goin' to desert an old pal, are you?"

Baden Knightly turned. "What's the matter now," he asked, fiercely. "You've got no claim on me. All that happened over there is past," jerking his head in the direction of the prison. "I want to blot it out from my memory, and you must be forgotten with it. I'm going home to my wife, I tell you."

The old man bowed his head in assent and sniffed. "All right, lad. All right," he muttered, and without raising his eyes, turned to depart.

Knightly watched him shuffle a few steps, then called him back. "Here; but, Billy, tell me what's the matter?"

Billy paused, but he did not come back. "I ain't got nowhere to go," he faltered, "and no one to care whether I stay in or come out. I guess the jail's my home—out here I feel somehow lost."

"Well, but what do you think I can do for you?" "Dun'no. Just let me be with you a little longer, I guess. We was pals over there—and now I'm so darned lonesome that I don't know what to do about it."

Billy's voice broke, and he fell to shedding the easy tears of the aged. The next thing he knew was that Knightly's arm was round his shoulders. "Speak up, old friend," he was saying. "I'm going to be so happy to-day that you must be happy too. Now tell me, what is there I can do for you?"

"Let me stay with you a little longer. I won't do you no harm, nor give you away. I'll behave myself. I'll just keep very quiet and pretend I don't know you. Let old Billy 'company you part way on your journey. When you're tired of him, all you've got to do is to tell him to go. Then he'll wait till you're out o' sight and do something to get himself arrested, and so get back home—over there."

Knightly thought for a few seconds; then, turning on his heel, "Come on," he said abruptly.

They walked to the station in silence. It was Sunday morning, and the bells were ringing for service. On their way they met family groups moving churchward. In the jail-city most residents were familiar with the gait of a recently discharged convict; Baden Knightly suffered the humiliation of seeing mothers to all—being their children, so a few mothers

chickens at a hint of danger, as he passed. He wondered whether Lucy in the old days, before her husband had become a pariah, would have behaved like that. Billy didn't wonder. He didn't seem to notice. He had been too long excommunicated to be able to muster the power of resentment; after forty years of such treatment, he took it as a matter of course.

On presenting themselves at the ticket office, they learned that an east-bound train would be due in half an hour. The agent looked at them hard, and followed them with his eyes as they moved away. On the first opportunity he communicated his suspicions to the train despatcher; the train despatcher handed on his information to the baggage master; when the east-bound train drew in, the baggage master warned the conductor and the brakeman; so by the time the conductor had collected all the tickets, every passenger on the train was aware that two ex-convicts were aboard.

Knightly glued his face to the window, trying not to notice the cruelty of the questioning eyes. He watched the brightness of the spring, and feasted his fancy on the greenness of the grass. It was two whole years since he had seen anything like that; in the jail all seasons had been the same—an interminable stretch of grayness.

At midday they drew into Scaford, a pleasant little manufacturing town, and there they alighted.

"Billy," he said, turning to his companion, "this is where I lived before my trouble came. My wife has been true to me, and has always believed that I was innocent. She promised, when they took me away, to keep everything just the same, so that when I came back we might pick up our life where it was dropped. She hasn't kept her word, though; eight months after they carried me off our baby arrived, so it'll be all different. She hasn't seen me in two years—I wouldn't let her; and I've never had a glimpse of our little child. So you see our first meeting will be very hard, and—and," his voice broke and he whispered the last two words, "very sacred—Billy, good-by; I'm going home now."

He held out his hand and the old man took it gently. "Good-by, pard, and good luck to you," he said. "I never had no home and I never had no wife; but I can guess what they means to those as have. Our friendship was made in jail, and I don't yet know what made a swell like you stoop to such a rotten old bum as I've become at seventy. I'll be back behind bars in a fortnight, I reckon; forty years in *quod* have spoiled me for the world. I'll never forget you, pard; and I hope to God I'll never set eyes on you again."

Knightly let go his hand and clutched him tightly by the arms, swaying him to and fro, peering down into his eyes. He couldn't trust himself to speak yet; when he did, his voice trembled and his face quivered like a woman's.

"See here, Billy," he said, "you're old enough to be my father. My father's dead; he died two years ago. I'm going to give you a piece of my mind. You're an old fool. You're as good a man as God has made, and you don't know it. I'm not going to let you drift back to jail; d'you hear what I say? Another sentence would kill you. Here's all the money I've got; I don't need it any longer. In four hours' time you be round by the station entry; when I've explained things to my wife, I'll come back and fetch you. You're going to live with me until you find work. D'you hear that?"

Without giving Billy time to thank him, he hurried away.

The trolleys didn't run in Scaford on Sundays, so he had to walk. He remembered with a smile that this delay was his own doing, for, years ago, when he was a prominent citizen, he had helped to put through the Sunday anti-traffic law.

He came at last, on the outskirts of the town, within sight of a house, surrounded by woodlands, standing on a hill. Even at that distance he watched to see a face at the windows. When he reached the entrance into the grounds he could no longer restrain himself; doubling up his arms, he broke into a run. He arrived at the front door panting, and tugged at the bell. The sound of it echoed faintly through the house. He was a little disappointed in Lucy; he had notified her a week ago that this was to be the day of days. That she had not met him at the station was quite in order, for he had begged her not to do so; but she might have sent a carriage—and even now she kept him waiting. He grew impatient and rang again. Still no one answered. He took to battering the panels of the door with his feet and hands.

Presently he heard a movement in an upper room. A window was pushed open and a shrill voice exclaimed: "Good Lord! Don't you know it's Sunday? Making such a row and disturbin' folks' rest!"

He stepped back from under the veranda on to the lawn. A frowsy woman was looking down on him from his own bedroom; her eyes were sleepy and she was only partly dressed. He had never seen her before. "Well, speak up, man," she called. "What is it that you want?"

"I want to get into my own house," he said, sharply. "And who the devil are you?"

"Your own house, indeed!" the woman sneered. "You look like it. This house is Mrs. Knightly's, and she's gone away to the country, nine miles from here. I guess I know who owns this house; I'm left in charge."

She had withdrawn her head and was preparing to slam down the window, when he stayed her by saying, "Well, I'm Mr. Knightly, and I want to know my wife's address."

She leaned out again with a new interest. "Oh, so you're Mr. Knightly, are you?" she drawled, surveying him from top to toe. "Well, I never! I've heered about you. Got anything to prove it?"

"Yes. I can describe to you everything that's in that room."

The woman laughed brutally. "Bet yer you can't; everything that was in this room has been moved out. After much palaver and anger and coaxing he per-

suaded her to give him his wife's address. She wasn't sure whether she was doing right about it, but there! she pitied the poor gentleman, she said.

All through the long and dusty afternoon he tramped; it was a warm day in spring and the effort was fatiguing. He was thirsty and hungry, having eaten nothing since the prison breakfast. But it wasn't his physical discomfort that troubled him; he was racking his brains to find an explanation for Lucy's removal. An inspiration came to him. Yes, that was the reason—it must be so. She knew that it would be hard for him to settle down at first in an environment where everything was known. A few weeks in the country, where they could overlive the past and the disgrace of the jail would make things easier. It was just like Lucy to foresee, and understand, and plan.

But even now he couldn't imagine why she should have failed to notify him. There could be only one excuse—that she had written and for some reason the letter had not reached him. He hadn't heard from her for a fortnight, which was curious. The letter had probably been delayed or lost.

Toward evening he topped the crest of a hill and looked down into a quiet valley. Its sides were divided into pastures, in which cattle were grazing. He could hear the lowing of the cows, heavy with milk, as the bars were thrown down and the dairymen drove them to the byres. Through the length of the valley ran a

heart cried out for her. Mustering his energies, he dragged himself up the path.

The door was answered promptly by a tidy maid, dressed in black, wearing a cap and apron.

Was Mr. Knightly at home? Yes, but just at present she was busy, putting baby to bed; could he leave any message, or would he call again later? He couldn't! Well, then, he had better step inside and wait. What was his name? He wouldn't give it! Then he could take a seat in the hall until Mrs. Knightly was ready.

Left to himself, he gazed stealthily round and pushed open a door to his right; he wished it his first meeting with Lucy to be quite private.

The room which he entered was evidently her favorite. He recognized the furniture; she must have brought it with her. A bowl of tulips stood on the table; she had always been fond of flowers, he remembered. A book lay beside the bowl. He picked it up, curious to see what she had been reading. It was a volume of Tennyson; the page was open at *Enoch Arden*. One passage had been underlined:

"But Enoch yearn'd to see her face again;
If I might look on her sweet face again,
And know that she were happy! So the thought
Haunted and harassed him, and drove him forth."

He smiled—so she had been thinking about him! In replacing the book his eye caught sight of a little garment thrown across the arm of a chair. She had been at work upon it; it was almost warm from her grasp. The needle, full of thread, had been carefully run into the stuff. He went upon his knees beside it, and kissed it reverently; it was the first belonging of his child that he had ever touched.

A footstep sounded on the stair; it approached slowly, reluctantly. He stood up. He tottered—his desire unnerved him and made him weak. Stretching out for support, he covered gropingly with his hands the baby garment which lay across the chair. A mist rose before his eyes, and with it came a sudden fear: what if he should go blind before he saw her!

The door opened and his wife entered. He waited

shaken with sobbing. Catching her by the wrists, he held her fast, so that she had to look up. "Come now," he muttered, "speak out. Why was it that you left? That at least you shall tell me."

She panted, fighting to release herself. "Because—because of baby," she gasped.

He let her go and his face fell vacant. Staggering away from her, he sank into the chair. She watched him with mingled pity and repulsion. So that was the reason! he whispered, gnawing at his hands and nodding his head, "because of baby."

Slowly intelligence came back to his eyes and he glanced up at her. "But why because of baby?" he faltered, and it was like a little child asking questions. "Lucy, I've never seen her—and I wouldn't hurt her."

There was silence for a minute. The woman was steadying herself that she might tell the truth at last. "While we were only two in the world I could bear it," she said, "and if the baby had been a boy, it wouldn't have mattered so much. A boy can fight for himself and is judged by his own worth; no one will avoid a boy because of his father. But somehow when the baby was a girl it seemed different. A girl can't fight. She isn't big and rough. She's so dependent on her men. And if one of her men is the cause of her insults—You know what I mean, Baden? It isn't that I'm cruel. I'm just saying what must be said. Who would love or marry a girl if he knew that her father had been—had been where you have just come from?"

"But you know that I was innocent?"

"Oh, yes, I know; but what about the world. You can't make the world believe that. You've served a two years' sentence, and the world will never forget it."

"Then I'm not only to be legally punished, but damned eternally for a deed which you know I have not done? Is that it?"

"Oh, Baden, I'm so sorry. But I can't help it. I could have been brave and would have stood by you, if baby hadn't come. I'm a coward, I know; and yet it isn't for myself—it's for her. I can't bear to think of what she would have to suffer if we lived together."

He staggered to his feet and had his hand on the door knob when a thought stayed him. His lips twitched and a last spurt of anger blazed into his eyes as he turned upon her. "And why the devil didn't you tell me all this before?" he blurted out. "You must have known a good twelve months ago that you intended to desert me. What kind of an Iscariot are you, to sit down and write me long loving letters—all pretence—with this hidden in your heart? If I'd known a year ago, I might have got used to your cant and been able to bear it."

She crouched at his feet, for she feared murder: she even brought herself to kiss his hands. He drew them away from her so roughly that her lips spurted blood. "Good God!" he sneered, "what kind of a creature do you think I am? You needn't flatter me. D'you suppose I'd stoop to kill you?" Then he saw the blood, and his fury died out. He bent toward her till their faces nearly touched. "Lucy," he whispered, pointing at her lips, "did I do that?"

She did not answer him, for her throat was parched with terror of death. He caught her in his arms, and did not notice how she shrank. Holding her tightly to his breast, he said: "Oh, Lucy, tell me, why did you write those letters? It was cruel."

"Because I was afraid to tell you."

"So you went away instead?"

Her lips moved, and the word they framed was "Yes."

"Poor little woman," he murmured; "poor little woman!" Then he kissed her on the mouth and left.

When he got back to Scaford it was nearing twelve. The houses were in darkness and the saloons all shut. The air had grown cooler and it had commenced to drizzle. He limped painfully; his feet were badly swollen and he felt worn out. He loitered in his steps and sometimes he halted, overcome by dizziness, clutching at whatever was nearest. Once, when he had halted, he caught a policeman eyeing him suspiciously straightening himself up, he tottered on.

He had just one desire in the world, and that was to find Billy; he would understand.

At the entry to the station he stumbled across him. His shoulders were huddled, his clothes drenched; he was heating his hands together to keep up circulation. It required but one glance to tell that this was not the Billy he had left.

"Got any money?" was his first question. "Spent all yer gave me. Y'er've kep' me waitin' mo' an' four hours. Had nothink ter do, she I got drunk."

Noticing the change in Knightly, he sobered up. "Wor's the matter?" he asked. "Wouldn't shave yer?"

Poor old pal! Wor's we goin' ter do nex'?"

In looking at him Knightly felt nothing but pity; but he was actually pitying himself. "So that's what they'll force me to come to!" was the thought which kept running through his head. Then, answering the old man's question as to what they were going to do next, "Get back," he said, shortly.

Billy stared in amazement. "Sho y'er've found' that out a ready, have yer?" he stammered.

Knightly paid him no attention. He was intent on a scheme for obtaining rest. When he had completed his plan, he outlined it to Billy, after which they parted.

Going to the ticket office he asked for a lower berth on the midnight express, which was due in half an hour. The clerk, having filled in the number, advanced to the window, retaining the ticket and awaiting the payment of the money before passing it across to the purchaser. Knightly engaged him in conversation, speaking so hoarsely that it was difficult to make out what he said. The clerk bent farther and farther forward in order that he might catch his words. Watching his opportunity, Knightly grabbed him by the hand, tugging his arm through beneath the iron grating till he held him firmly.

Billy, who had been hovering about the ladies' room on the other side of the ticket office, hearing the clamor, dashed his foot through the pane of glass in the door which entered at the back. The moment Knightly, peering through the grating, caught sight of him, he called to him to slip his hand through the broken pane, unlock the door, and clear out all the cash. Meanwhile, the clerk, gripped fast by the arm, was bawling lustily for help.

Knightly saw the copped head of Billy appear through the shattered glass, then his shoulder, and at last his hand, groping drunkenly for the key. He had found it and was about to turn it, when a club descended on his neck. The club was raised and again descended; then followed a shower of blows, sickening in their brutality. The old ex-convict was beaten down till, desisting from struggle, his body hung limply through the door-frame and ceased to stir.

Knightly released the clerk; he had accomplished his purpose. Making no effort to escape, he seated himself quietly on the nearest bench. "That's done the trick," he muttered, gloomily, talking to himself. "We'll get back now. They'll give us seven years at least for that."

But in the case of Billy he was mistaken, for Billy was dead.

The trial was soon over. By his second offense Baden Knightly had declared himself to be a dangerous criminal and had become an old hand. Within six weeks he had sent him back to prison, with a ten years' sentence to work out.



"So that was the reason!"